

## MODERN WITH THE SOUTHERN ACCENT

By JOHN CROWE RANSOM

THE literary procession in this country sometimes occurs to us as moving as fast as it can, and keeping well away from the beaten road. The South, therefore, reputed to be not merely slow but positively backward, must have had moments of vainglory, or apprehension as the case may be, over recent evidences that its own writers were keeping up.

For example, there has been the sense that Mr. Tate was a poet just as esoteric as Mr. Eliot or Mr. Crane; and, as to fiction, that nobody was any more abandoned in the employment of the stream of consciousness than Mr. Faulkner, or quite so free and easy in his objectivity as Mr. Caldwell.

These qualities in literature seem technical; they give the surface of modernism. But they are in harmony with its depths. If modernism is regarded as nothing but a new technique, what was wrong with the old technique? Principally, perhaps, the fact that it was old; for modernism is apt to assume that tradition is not so much a prop which may be leant upon as a dead burden which must be borne. The substance of modernism is not a technique but an attitude. And a dangerous attitude; this we may learn from Mr. Krutch, who has studied it in "The Modern Temper." Modernism is a progressive disease, and we in the Occident are now in an advanced stage of it, says Mr. Krutch. Suppose we waive the question of how far gone we may be, and whether the ravages are still remediable; it is his definition of the abstract thing that impresses me. For modernism is skepticism and disillusionment, and ends in despair. We come to such a

degree of self-consciousness that we question our natural motives of action and our inherited patterns of behaviour. As good animals we should not do this, for we are left without a vocation, we are stranded; the new motives cannot have more authority than the old ones, for the basis of action is not rational. Thus we commit a spiritual suicide. Now as artists, we ought to reflect (doubtless in other periods did reflect), piously and spontaneously, the causes, attachments, affections, passions, which we cherish as men and women. And if we no longer cherish them? Then our art must reflect our weariness and cynicism; it becomes modern art.

Many persons are temperamentally opposed to Mr. Krutch's powerful way of reasoning, and very sure that humanity must go marching on, passing unscathed from modernism to modernism. These would here object that modernism is health as much as it is decay, that it may declare itself in revolution as well as in despair. I feel obliged to reply that this is not quite so in the South. There is a backwardness in the physical conduct of life here, and there is a backwardness lying much deeper in the Southern temper. It is as if by some secret intuition, one which Mr. Krutch ought to approve, that the South has always been slow to question the authority of habit, and to initiate basic changes, even if they have gone under the pretty name of Progress. You will find in the South some motions which look more or less hopefully to conservation, or restoration, or reform, but it is not here that you will find your revolutions. The Southern artists in going modern offer us their impression of a general decay, and that is not a pleasant thing to think about. But another impression which they offer is that, if the old illusions are spent, they do not rush to commit themselves to new ones, and prefer, on the whole, to go down under standards which, if tattered and disreputable, may still be technically said to fly. It is a stubborn attitude, and trying to readers of a certain cast.

It is in this sense, I think, that the Southern writers have

gone modern. They reflect decay; their convictions have gone, while their tastes and habits still linger. And here is a strange thing, that the South in its strength never bloomed into art so luxuriantly as now, when the tree is old and dry. A biological notion about that sort of thing became fixed in my mind when I was a little boy, though I think it has no scientific recommendation. There was an apple tree which dropped its limbs one by one as the seasons went by, and finally crashed to earth in a storm. But its apples seemed to grow finer every year to the end, and to be much superior to the apples of the other and healthier trees. I had the feeling that the flavor was better even though the apples tended to be faulty, and could not always be eaten. Are the works of art like those apples, reaching their best when the society behind them is under sentence of death? I offer that as a rhetorical question, not proposing to answer it. But there must be many Southerners waiting like myself to hear the right explanation of the skimpiness of Southern art in those very days when the Southern tradition was unquestioned; and we must feel chastened when we remark that an admired brilliancy in the contemporary display tends nearly always to coincide with a deep-seated decadence.

## II

In coming now to the discussion of cases, it is obvious that all the cases cannot here be discussed. Nor is it intimated that any comparative estimate is being attempted. (I do not know how to make comparative estimates.) It is quite possible that writers who do not have the specific qualities I am looking for may have other qualities which, so far as I know, may be entirely equivalent or even superior.

I begin with the Charleston writers; they are less subtle, and easier to define, than some other writers; and there is another reason too. At Charleston the Southern idea of a formal society, I presume, is in a better state of preservation than anywhere else. The beautiful houses are still there, so

are the fine manners, and the conversation in the ample drawing-rooms and dining-rooms. Still there also is, I am afraid, the old paralysis, the failure of understanding in this particular art, which used to keep the South from producing its appropriate literature. The Charleston writers are producing a literature, but it is irrelevant to what Charleston stands for, and it is not Southern.

The scenes are laid in the South. But a Southern literature, I think, will never be constituted by a local color, for its essence is a spirit. There is a wide literary use nowadays of the Southern scene, which includes cotton plantations, tobacco farms, piney woods, Charlestons, Deltas, swamps; of Southern stage-properties, such as magnolias and live-oaks, cane-stalks and yams, homespun garments, bandannas, gardenias, banjos; and of stock Southern characters, such as mountaineer distillers and feudists, darkies, orators, Fundamentalists, as well as persons of ordinary costume and behaviour but given to accents and idioms. Though these materials may make the fortune of authors, they can hardly be said to determine the product as Southern.

The Negroes of Mrs. Peterkin's books, and the Negroes, half-breeds, and occasional whites of Mr. Heyward's books, are authentic, and everything as literally local as it could be. The competence of the two authors is not open to question; they do exactly what the generic good author from anywhere might do, in an almost indifferent or predictable manner. Let them do it; yet perhaps one may be absolved of impertinence for wondering how it could be that the accomplishments practiced in Charleston drawing-rooms should be able to be put on and off, and their owners' minds turned like *tabulæ rasæ* (that is, like unformed intelligences) to the reception and communication of "art." If Mr. Heyward writes vigorously, if in fact he slightly overwrites, like an energetic novelist on a flying trapeze, doing full justice to all the functions of narrative, being very pictorial when it is scenery, and very dramatic when it is action, and more sym-

pathetic than patronizing when it is characters; and if Mrs. Peterkin excels in that peculiarly modern virtue of fidelity to the mental level of the character, scrupulously extruding herself and all Charleston in order that the character may speak for himself;—why, that is very well, except that the eminent advantages of a Charleston background do not figure in the exercise.

To be Southern means, if Mr. Mencken will permit, to have more than usual "character," and of a certain sort; but I use the term innocently, meaning by character simply a fixed basis of judgment, and a conventional way of talking about things. This character will carry over very nicely into the enterprise of art. The book itself then assumes a character, which is that of its author. Lacking in this character, and therefore un-Southern I should say, are those modern stories which present a stream of consciousness alien to the author's own habit of mind, or an objective exhibit foreign to his milieu. I am aware that such stories may be great triumphs of sympathy and disinterestedness, and that the gift for doing them has been acquired by fiction with great pains, and only in recent times. The fact is that it is a modern gift, and symptomatic of modernism; it means that the author has elected to abandon his own character. If he is of one level of culture and his persons of another, the inference may be that it is because he is tired of his own, and finds more life in the other. A romantic primitivism in a cultivated artist is an admission that may be held against him; it will be held against him by the keen critics, such as Mr. Edmund Wilson and Mr. Lewis Mumford.

So the Charleston novels are not Charleston in spirit, but may be construed somewhat indirectly as witnesses to Charleston's decay.

The alternative view would be to suppose that Mrs. Peterkin and Mr. Heyward were so inexperienced in literature that when they "took it up" they simply proceeded to pick the juiciest subjects and to treat them in the popular styles.

That view does not consist with my estimate of the cultural level of Charleston authors.

Charleston poetry, like Charleston fiction, is built on local color; it has no Southern quality so far as I can see. But these notes will have to be devoted to fiction for the most part, with perhaps a general note on poetry in conclusion.

### III

The capital of the late Confederacy was Richmond, and there today sits Mr. James Branch Cabell, addicted to the manners of a formal society though extremely disaffected as to its force and present availability. We have grown used to thinking that Mr. Cabell will always be himself, will always—in an impolite parlance which he would not employ—be his age. His Southern quality is in his firm sentences, which have a pattern both syntactical and rhythmical; in his politeness, which does not in the least blunt his satirical barbs. In short, it is in his style. A style, for my purpose, is the most determining feature of a literary work, for what is a style? Something very integral and central, if intangible. The style is the man, and it is in the style at last that the antique Southerner is manifested.

His works fall into two strangely assorting groups: earlier novels about the mannered gentry of Virginia, and later ones about fabulous yet very human figures in Poictesme. The effects achieved in the earlier novels were not too happy. The characters were so dominated by their code, and so sententious about it, that they lacked vitality, they acted wooden, and their histories tended to turn out as farcical comedies. It was as if because he could not express himself through such a society that Mr. Cabell turned to fairyland. His characters there are uninhibited as to conduct, but their speech is highly literate and their manners charming, and their author furnishes a witty commentary. It is not as if Mr. Cabell in turning to fantasy were renouncing his society, but as if he were renouncing the world itself; it is the

constitution of the world, not the polite form of society, which fails to provide the advertised joy of life. The romancing in which Mr. Cabell indulges in his imaginary world is riotous but soon spent (this is its concession to his realism), and melancholy, sensing its own mortality. The stories are not heroic and sustained, they are shift and episodic; structurally repetitious and flimsy, so that I for one can scarcely distinguish one from another. But on any page I can distinguish Mr. Cabell, a writer of character, and that character Southern.

There is also Miss Glasgow. Like most writers whose careers I have followed, she has had one which has been a progress. As the author of "Barren Ground," for example, she had no more of a Southern attitude than did Walter Hines Page. Quite accurately, she saw the Southern soil as something that needed to have work done upon it and the Southern population as a working personnel whose efficiency offered some room for improvement. At that stage she wrote the novel of purpose, and did a businesslike job of it. Then—if my terms do not sound disrespectful—she grew into the mannered and formal habit of mind which was exemplified by Mr. Cabell, by a percentage of Virginians, and by a somewhat smaller percentage of Southerners at large. It changed the basis of her art. She found a new subject-matter, she developed a style. She also developed an irony; the gift, unless it be the curse, of that modern temper which penetrates into the irrational constitution of the world and is not upset by it, does not fly into fevers, attitudes, or tirades. "They Stooped to Folly," among other books of hers, is Southern modernism in every way; in the ease and firmness of its style, in the subject-matter, and in the irony of the conclusions.

Miss Frances Newman was of Georgia, and therefore of this modern Richmond only in spirit. The public has a lively impression of the modernism of a writer who gave to her book the title, "The Hard-Boiled Virgin." It is not neces-

sarily observed that she belonged completely to that same old-fashioned order of writers, who might well be called the Schoolmen of Southern fiction; to the formalists. She too had a style. It dominated her book to such an extent that it turned its dialogue into *Oratio Obliqua*, and made the book as we read it feel like the most finished and the most economical narrative ever written. Thus:

Katharine Faraday sat on the little hotel's porch long enough to hear Robert Carter respectfully spoken of as a Virginian gentleman who differed from other Virginian gentlemen in cultivating a taste for learning which twenty thousand dollars a year and his name made unnecessary, and she was pleased when the third volume of Lord Macaulay's history drew him to her yellow hammock. She did not suppose that he could be her destined husband, since he was an American, and since he already had a wife who wore limp white gowns. But she thought that conversation with him would be good practice for the conversations she might some day have with the brilliant young peers for whom she would pour out tea with milk and three lumps of sugar, and which might equal anything in the novels of Benjamin Disraeli.

#### IV

A few generalizations. It occurs to me that honest discretion will cause the Southern critic of literature, no matter how patriotic, to set up two propositions for his own admonition. First, that a writer may evidently have the juridical status of a Southerner without having the temper of one; for the South cannot now be construed, under the legend, as a unified, powerful, ubiquitous spirit who imposes one habit of mind upon all her children. And second, that some writers must impress us as having Southern quality, or something like it, who are not physically of the South; the implication being that, for the philosophy of literature, it is not the specifically Southern localism that matters but the fact of localism at all; that is, the reference of everything in the story to the *genius loci*, or spirit of the local back-



ground. A concrete formalism is, then, the Southern sort of thing. The adjective Southern is a proper name like Romantic or Gothic; it becomes a descriptive classification in our literature (if critics want it so) only by reason of the series of historical accidents that has made the South stand in this country as now the only considerable locus for the particular kind of literature. That is, it is easier to say Southern than to name the qualities that come under the term.

I should say that the early James had the qualities, though he was not a Southerner. His habitual reference was to the formal society, and it determined his subject-matter and his sentence-structure. But being without a local society of his own, he went in more and more for a cosmopolitan, eclectic, international, and rather denatured order of society, whereupon his art modified itself radically. His style, in this faster company, became so brilliantly flexible as to be invertebrate; there has never been a Southerner who could write in that way, or who wished to. Other figures who have something like a Southern attitude are, at one time or another of their careers, Mrs. Edith Wharton, Miss Dorothy Canfield, and Miss Willa Cather. Mrs. Wharton and Miss Glasgow are spiritually sometimes almost indistinguishable. Both of them have had to contend with moral or Puritan fervors which would have destroyed their ironies, their styles, and their æsthetic interests. This is Mrs. Wharton when she is not inhibited:

Mrs. Raycie, though built on a less heroic scale, had a pale amplitude which, when she put on her best watered silk (the kind that stood alone), and framed her countenance in the innumerable blonde lace ruffles and clustered purple grapes of her newest Paris cap, almost balanced her husband's bulk. Yet from this full-rigged pair, as the Commodore would have put it, had issued the lean little runt of a Lewis, a shrimp of a baby, a shaver of a boy, and now a youth as scant as an ordinary man's midday shadow.

Miss Cather was born in Virginia, but that advantage, or

disability, has not quite proved determining; she was bred in the West. Her early books purported to sing, in a subdued lyrical prose, of the geology, meteorology, archæology, and commercial flora of the West, and of her heroes and heroines the laborious pioneers. These careful ecstasies, I think, were not quite expressive of her, just as they are not expressive of the South; it is Southern to love Nature, but not to fall into mysticism before it. All the time, it seems to me, the note was a little bit forced; there was evident "the need of a world of men" for this novelist. Miss Cather wanted to be, and was, a child of civilization, with formal standards. Latterly she has found the marriage of her two interests in the story of how East met West when Roman Catholicism made its stately invasions. It is in this writing that she is, to the social critic of letters, most "satisfactory."

If there is this degree of literary identity between North and South, there are even more definite differences. There are certain types of fiction which are widely popular in this country but rarely written in the South.

(1)—Stenographic fiction, or fiction consisting in notes only, for which we are indebted to Mr. Hemingway. It is said to be a derivative of journalism. It is an author's device for removing himself and his commentary. It is a chapter in the modern legend of the Shamefaced Author.

(2)—Inclusive Realism, which aims at volume in the objective detail. The detail is not valued by being referred to code, character, or story. Here again the author is careful not to appear. If there is a serious doctrine behind it, it is that he, and we, are supposed to be absorbed mystically into the object.

(3)—The fiction which is critical of its characters; specifically, the militant Liberal fiction which is given to preaching through the novel. Mr. Sinclair Lewis is a distinguished example of this school. The Liberal in fiction attacks the formal societies, which seem to rest on a cruel class distinction and to be conservative rather than progressive in principle; naturally he finds material to his hand in the Southern

scene. His weapon is the case-history of the persecuted hero; it is satire, and caricature. Certainly the Liberal may make out his case, but he should argue it openly as Mr. Mencken does, and not under the form of fiction. *Æsthetic* intention is not the most robust aspect of the human will; it is easily discouraged, it may expire, if the ethical intention competes with it. But it is unnecessary to argue a point now so familiar to Anglo-Saxon communities. It is more in order to say that some Liberalism has appeared among Southern writers. Miss Glasgow's earlier heresy has been noted. More recently there is Mr. Stribling, a Pulitzer prize winner, with his mildly defamatory stories about Tennessee and Alabama. For fiction it does not matter that Mr. Stribling's exposures are just or otherwise, but it does matter that the *æsthetic* expectation of the gentle reader is disappointed. The reader is in the position of the master of an old estate who has gone walking with a new friend in the ruined wood, for the sake of better acquaintance, and of enjoyment; but who discovers that the friend is a tree doctor, unable to see anything but decaying trees and to talk about anything but tree surgery. An occasion which was meant for good company will not do for salesmanship; there has been a fundamental error of taste. And there is also Mr. Erskine Caldwell, of Georgia, who has a Rabelaisian gift for savage poor-white comedy, but will suddenly leave off being Rabelais in order to be Shelley, the social reformer, a much softer part. But if Liberalism has invaded literature, it has made less inroad on the Southern variety, and it is essentially here an importation.

(4)—Proletarian fiction, an extension of Liberal fiction, impressed and sworn into the fight for the overthrow of capitalistic society and supported now by some able Eastern critics. Its *æsthetic* interest is frankly subordinate. It has, I think, few supporters in the South, and nothing could be further from the *æsthetic* understanding of Southern writers.

## V

Returning to the more positively Southern performance. It would be unfair to stop with Charleston and Richmond as if Southern literature were a seaboard affair. There are several directions which we might take inland. For example, it would be profitable to go along the Tennessee-Kentucky border until we came to the literary monuments erected by Miss Elizabeth Madox Roberts and Miss Caroline Gordon. But a completer change in the natural and human geography will be accomplished by taking a more Southern route. We come upon one of the most emphatically Southern communities, Mississippi, and two of the most artful Southern writers, Mr. Stark Young and Mr. William Faulkner. They contrast with each other much as charm might contrast with power, but both are complex. I shall not undertake to expound them, but it does not seem too difficult to indicate some of the features of their Southern modernism.

Mr. Young is interested in the aristocratic tradition. It happens that his most popular book, "So Red the Rose," is his latest in point of composition but his earliest in point of the period treated: the South of the 'fifties and 'sixties. His book on the modern scene, "River House," did not win the reputation it deserved. I think, frankly, that the general American public was not prepared to accept the representation of an aristocratic tradition once powerful and still extant in Mississippi, being accustomed to ascribe that sort of thing to Virginia and Charleston. So it is as if he composed his recent book in order to give a popular lesson in history. In fact, it has a look of documentation in some places, where the story comes to a stand, and the æsthetic properties of the old life about Vicksburg are lovingly and almost laboriously sketched in. At any rate, "So Red the Rose" is a historical romance, and therefore cannot be all that we expect of a novel in the complete sense.

It is in "River House" that the old South and the new South come to the parting of the ways. The son, who has

been in the North, a banker, returns to the old house, a prodigal almost excessively charged with the filial sense of return and anxious to make it full and loyal, bringing with him a wife who has much less of the Southern inheritance than he but at the same time a woman's understanding of its rarity and fineness—and still it cannot succeed. It does not matter just what is the precise quarrel between the father and the son. Mr. Young may wish us to disregard his own record, but the accumulating irrational frictions do convince us that the old and the new, with the best will in the world, cannot live together. It is a tragic conclusion, that Southernism and modernism are not going to be permanently compatible; and especially that modernism will prevail, when it is so clear that the introspective young moderns have lost the power of happiness. At the present critical moment, when the two orders still may be seen as somewhat equal in strength, though the strength of the one is ebbing and the strength of the other is increasing, it may be said that the two are compatible, and do coexist without derogation from either, in one place and one place only: in a literary art, like Mr. Young's, where their faithful embodiment in one action gives us something as complex, rich, and dramatic as could well be found.

I may as well acknowledge that I find myself constantly thinking of a Southern style, as of a species, with a peculiar connotation all its own, and a denotation fairly covering the general field of Southern writers; hoping, without demonstrating, that there is something in it, since it is not questioned that there is a species of English prose which only Irishmen, for instance, can write; and not falling into the vulgar error of thinking it must necessarily produce good writing, since there is a great deal of writing which is obviously Southern yet intolerably bad. In making this ingenuous confession perhaps I deliver myself into Mr. Mencken's hands, but I reflect that, if I do not know what I am talking about, there is a strong probability that he will not know either.

Mr. Young's style is not so obviously Southern as was that of the Richmond writers. It is more modern, with no declamatory quality, deriving certain virtues if few vices from journalism, and fighting with a good deal of success, yet I think visibly, against old formal effects; but Southern or derivative from the Southern in a quality for which I know no other term than mellifluousness—a quality that is gratefully apparent to our physical bodies if we have to read our literature aloud.

I cite from Mr. Young a characteristic delicacy, and ask how many other living writers would have been likely to write it:

He thought of that closed parlor upstairs, above the living-room, and of the five old people there at River House now. A new feeling of pity came into him; and, though he could not have put it into words, the light came to him for the first time of what pity is: a form of repentance, where the soul is free of its special pride and its sense of difference from others, and turns back to its common humanity. It does not feel condescension toward the other it pities, but knows its own nature, as it takes into itself this other soul and all that this other soul must suffer.

But Mr. Faulkner, I suppose, is the most exciting figure in our contemporary literature just now; he is original, and he has not been classified. It is my impression that his critics as yet have hardly got beyond the exclamatory stage. It is still being discovered that he is a powerful new genius, with a bias toward horror and the morbid.

He is adept at the modern techniques, but much too bold to content himself with any safe or consistent craftsmanship. He obtains atmosphere and characterizations with almost a new minimum of machinery; and I suppose this is the consequence not of some particular trick which he has discovered so much as of the speed and strength of his mind. He presents his story preferably from the points of view of a succession of interested characters. These characters will probably be low in their social and literary standing, but it

does not follow that their reception is not acutely sensitive or their mental associations fairly complex. Mr. Faulkner does not underrate the intelligence of his poor whites. Their speech (and thought) may be harsh and brutal, but again it will be rhythmed and eloquent, perhaps marked with a Biblical turn of phrase, certainly with a poetic, and sometimes with a "metaphysical." I am not sure but that it passes belief, but I think we who are alien to the scene should be very cautious about that.

Certainly Mr. Faulkner's eye is not especially on the decaying aristocrats; among the social classes they have no monopoly in decay. Cruelty, idiocy, degeneracy, blasphemy, vice, incest, arson, murder, are some of its marks; which do not obliterate tenderness, love, loyalty, stoicism, the powerful impulse to respectability, religion, and a sense, the opposite of revolutionary, of society as a fixed order which goes on though private persons err and suffer. I quote:

"It's fixing up to rain," pa says. "I am a luckless man. I have ever been." He rubs his hands on his knees. "It's that durn doctor, liable to come at any time. I couldn't get word to him till so late. If he was to come to-morrow and tell her the time was nigh, she wouldn't wait. I know her. Wagon or no wagon, she wouldn't wait. Then she'd be upset, and I wouldn't upset her for the living world. With that family burying-ground in Jefferson and them of her blood waiting for her there, she'll be impatient. I promised my word me and the boys would get her there quick as mules could walk it, so she could rest quiet." He rubs his hands on his knees. "No man ever misliked it more."

"If everybody wasn't burning hell to get her there," Jewel says in that harsh, savage voice. "With Cash all day long right under the window, hammering and sawing at that—"

"It was her wish," pa says. "You got no affection nor gentleness for her. You never had. We would be beholden to no man," he says, "me and her. We have never yet been, and she will rest quieter for knowing it and that it was her own blood sawed out the boards and drove the nails. She was ever one to clean up after herself."

## VI

It would be an unintelligible question if we should ask, Which is the more important—fiction or verse? Neither art can serve for the other. Yet it is a fact that in Southern literature at the moment the attention paid to fiction is much larger than the attention paid to poetry, and likewise that the average mental age of the novelist is greater than the average mental age of the poet. There was something in the former South which disinclined its talkers from committing themselves with equal proficiency to the writing of prose; and something which in turn disinclined its writers of prose from the writing of verse. Suddenly, and in some way connected with the force of social decay and modernism, the prose fiction has come abundantly to life; but the verse is not yet, on the whole, alive.

A phenomenon like this I should attribute not to any constitutional cause but to pure contingency. There is lacking in the equipment of our writers a sufficient æsthetic of poetry, and that is all the cause that is required. I do not mean to be invidious when I suggest that poetry is a finer art than prose; for I mean something quite precise. Poetry is more subtle, more energetic, involving line for line more of the author's character or, which is the same thing, more turn-over of his thought and experience; and this is aside from its special mechanical or musical complication. If the specific gravity of poetry could be measured and compared with the specific gravity of prose, whether these arts were viewed as the experience of the composers or the experience of the readers, the difference would be in favor of poetry, and it would be very great.

This is not quite so obvious as it may sound, for it is common to read, in effect, that children, if they are good, turn into poets, and that poets, if they have a proper development, turn into writers of prose, or mature persons. Again it would seem to be by pure accident if this is so; the accident being that the kind of poetry to which society has accustomed it-



self is childish, whereas it need not be childish at all. Poetry will hardly engage the attention of adults until it is aware of what it can do.

A poetry of low intellectual level cannot be Southern, Western, Dutch, or Japanese; that is, aside from the fundamental test of language in its broadest sense. It is not the children of the races who differ so much, but the adults; a "culture" defines itself in the arts and sciences of a race, assumes its full distinctness of pattern in the midst of those advanced activities where the mind is freest and can really express itself. So that, if a little journal of poetry somewhere in America were to publish twenty-five poems in the same number, and all of them were equally pretty and youthful and slight, we would never think of turning to the key to discover where the authors came from, for we would know that it made no difference whether they came from Alabama, Rhode Island, or Saskatchewan.

There is little distinctively Southern poetry, then, because one of the peculiarities of the region is in the fact that it still conceives poetry as an adolescent function, and all adolescents are more or less alike. But there is some. It is no better than it should be, to put it mildly; but in it at any rate the authors undertake to express their best minds.

When they do that they will inevitably be Southern, if their minds still adhere to a regional set, as the novelists' minds do. They will also be modern, if, like the novelists, and like Death after Adam's fall, they have "snuff'd the smell of mortal change on Earth."